DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 132 864 FL 008 274

AUTHOR Statman, Stella
TITLE Teaching Grammar for Purposes of Comprehension to Students of English as a Foreign Language at University Level.
PUB DATE [76]
NOTE 10p.; Best copy available

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Course Descriptions; Curriculum Guides; *English (Second Language); English for Special Purposes; Form Classes (Languages); *Grammar; Higher Education; *Language Instruction; Language Skills; *Reading Comprehension; Reading Skills; *Second Language Learning; Semantics; Sentence Structure; Teacher Developed Materials

ABSTRACT

Most students of English as a Foreign Language at University level find it confusing to read professional material in their field of study. Their confusion stems not only from their lack of training in reading comprehension but also from their inability to recognize or to distinguish between certain grammatical constructions. It is suggested that a brief introductory course in grammar for purposes of comprehension can serve a valuable purpose in isolating difficulties and in equipping students with the new reading skills which their university courses require. A set of worksheets for such a course is outlined briefly, and suggestions are offered for the production of additional material. (Author/AM)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED132864

S. Statman.

Teaching Grammar for Purposes of Comprehension to Students of English as a Foreign Language at University Level.

Most teachers of English as a Foreign Language at university level are familiar with the frustrations of a student who tries to make sense of an English sentence by extracting the general meaning of the words he recognizes in some kind of linear order and then combining them according to the patterns of his native language. Everything is reduced to the barest essentials, a kind of pidgin understanding. All verb forms dissolve; only the meaning of the infinitive remains. If in L_1 the noun precedes the adjective, then whenever the student meets an unfamiliar adjectival form or a noun which functions as an adjective, the adjective will be understood as the headword in a combination. Thus, "a market town" is understood as "a town market". A noun clause, particularly in the NP -subject position is another source of confusion, especially if it begins with the relative "How" or "What" etc. (How the book will sell depends on the author"). The student is hard put to decide if he is dealing with a question or not. The list of potential 'confusers' is long. The experienced teacher often finds that when students do succeed in the struggle for comprehension, it is because they have recognized the noun markers, preposition markers and certain clause markers. These meaning bearing structures provide a skeleton on which the rest of the words can be hung. But even here, absolute, confident, precise comprehension is rarely achieved.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

An explanation for the students' difficulties is not hard to find. In his High school studies, the average student is drilled in all the patterns of the English language and as far as possible, is given texts in which only the patterns he has learnt appear, always in given collocations. In order to make the texts relevant, many current teaching materials present situational English. By the time he enters university, the student knows how to order a meal in an English restaurant how to write a letter to a friend and to make small talk; He has read Pygmalion and a few English short stories. Now, suddenly, he finds he needs a different skill He no longer needs to produce English sentences but only to understand them. His reading matter is no longer narrative or descriptive prose but professional texts in which the writer's art is that of exposition and argument. If the student's previous reading habits resulted in superficial comprehension, he must now learn to read carefully and understand precisely the meaning of a given text.

The new kind of reading demands the acquisition of new skills. It is the purpose of this paper to suggest that a brief introductory course in grammar for purposes of comprehension such as we outline below serves a valuable purpose in isolating difficulties, remedying weaknesses and equipping the student to tackle the kind of professional texts he will meet in his field of study. Such a course is highly selective in the choice of material. [redacted] Commands, requests, colloquialisms have almost no place in it as they are not likely to occur in the kind of material which the student will meet. Similarly, there is no need to dwell on the differences between the present simple and the present continuous

or to drill constructions using "although" and "in spite of.." ; such distinctions as exist do not pose any difficulties in comprehension. In short, the student only needs to be taught those aspects of English grammar where incomplete understanding will lead to a confused interpretation of the writer's message.

University students, and rightly so, expect material to be presented in a varied and thought-stimulating manner. One of the aims of a course in reading comprehension in general and of the course we shall detail in particular should be to heighten student awareness of the way in which language is used to make meaning, of the way in which the rules of grammar and the rules of logic combine to create expectations in the mind of the language- learner.

In such a short paper, it is impossible to do more than outline briefly the form and content of the introductory course. Essentially it consists of five worksheets. Each sheet demands a different skill, either because it deals with a different aspect of grammar or because it presents the material in a different way. The sheets are distributed singly to the students who are given about 10-15 minutes to complete the exercises. The answers are then reviewed by the instructor. The papers are not collected and there are no grades so class tension is kept as low as possible. The papers are not intended as complete exercises; they are intended only to expose weaknesses and to give the instructor a starting point for an explanation of any point of grammar which is not clear to the class. As will be clear shortly, the discussion enables the

instructor to review the grammatical structures as they influence comprehension in a far more palatable and useful way than would be possible were the student to be presented with yet another set of grammar exercises.

Sheets I and II

Semantic confusers.

The student is given sets of similar sentences. He is asked to translate the sentences into his native tongue or to explain the difference between the sentences in English. A review of student answers enables the teacher, where necessary, to deal with word order, differences between adjective and adverb, punctuation markers (restrictive and non-restrictive clauses), perfect tenses, anaphora, modals etc. Here are a number of examples. The 'confuser' and the relevant grammar point should be immediately obvious.

He is an only child.
He is only a child.

I saw a Venetian blind.
I saw a blind Venetian.

If he comes he will bring his dog.
If he comes he brings his dog.

When he saw the beautiful girl he stopped to look at her.
When he saw her husband he stopped looking at her.

They had to work in an extensive heat affected area.
They had to work in an extensively heat affected area.

He has lived here for six years.
He lived here for six years.

My brother who lives in Jerusalem plays tennis regularly.
My brother, who lives in Jerusalem, plays tennis regularly.

She is happily married.
Happily, she is married.

She is ugly but rich.
He has but a year to live.

The blue dress would be cheaper.
The blue dress should be cheaper.

The door was open at midnight.
The door was opened at midnight.

Sheet II. Semantic Confusers cont.

This work is continued on another worksheet in which similar material is presented in the form of multiple choice questions. Here are some examples.

"What we learned in the last lesson is of great importance."

In this sentence, the writer
a. asks if what we learned in the last lesson is important.
b. tells us that what we learned in the last lesson is important.

"All the young students who attend this course understand English."
According to this sentence,
a. all the young students understand English.
b. only some young students understand English.

"It is possible that you will pass the course if you work hard".
This sentence implies
a. you will pass the course.
b. you may pass the course.
c. you should pass the course.
d. you can pass the course.

"I am used to reading English every day."
According to the speaker.

a. In the past, he read English every day.
b.English is used by him every day.
c. He is in the habit of reading English every day.

"If I had time I would learn more English."
The speaker
a. is referring to something that happened in the past."
b. expects to have time in the future.
c is referring to something which he knows is not likely to happen.

"Similarly with family of origin. This can be crucial in some areas of society but is less so in such spheres as the professions, universities, organized athletics and the entertainment industry."
The subject of the words "is less so" in sentence 11is
a. areas of society.
b. spheres.
c. family of origin.
d. crucial.

Sheet 111.
Recognition of noun clauses.

The student is asked to underline the main verb in each of the following sentences. This kind of exercise often presents difficulties. In the course of explanation, students should be shown that the noun clause can be replaced by either a noun (something) or a pronoun ("it").

That we need more tome to finish thework is obvious.
How the book will sell depends oh the author.
I can't imagine what made him do it.
My original question, how much he got for the house, has not been answered.
Vote for which candidate you like.
He asked what he could do to help me.
It is clear that we need much more practice.
Whatever decision they make will be approved by the authorities.

Sheet IV.
This worksheet is intended to review passive transformations, modifiers in the prenominal

position and prediction.

1. When I was asked for help with the homework, I quietly refused and was met by shouts of anger.
2. When I asked for help with thehomework, I was met by shouts of anger.

Who was asked to help with the homework ?

Sentence 1. Sentence 2.

Why was thewriter met by shouts of anger ?

Sentence 1. Sentence 2.

1. Running down the street, the policeman caught the thief.
2. Running down the street, the thief was caught by the policeman.

Who was running down the street ?

Sentence 1. Sentence 11.

Complete the following sentences.

In their hunger, the crowd tore open the boxes and pulled out handfuls of the small, yellow .....

To be white and not black, Protestant and not Catholic, rich and not ....., ...and not an immigrant will givehne status in certain American social groups.

But .....the differences , both girls have much in common.

.....he was late , they missed the concert.

Of course,the exercises listed here are only suggestions. The choice must vary according to the level of the students and to the degree of interferance of the structures of their nativelanguage with the understanding of English. There are other possibilities. As preparation for dictionary use, a worksheet can be compiled to test

the students' ability to recognize word classes by asking them to identify the class of the same word used in different positions in the sentence, e.g.

He dropped the stone. They built a stone wall. They wanted to stone the thief. They threw a round ball. They walked round the corner. They walked round. She tried to round the corner etc.

A sheet could be drawn up to illustrate the different meanings of adverbials in certain combinations (They wounded him deeply. They wounded him bad.g) and so on. The innovative teacher can change or extend the number of sheets according to the needs of the students.

At this point , the student is ready for worksheet V in which he is taught to recognize the noun markers (determiners), verb markers (be, have, modals), phrase markers (prepositions and) clause markers. This sheet is presented to the student with blanks in the brackets and they are asked to fill in the empty spaces . During the discussion, a complete list is compiled. Clause markers are particularly important. Next to word order, they are the most important meaning-bearing structures and they should be taught very thoroughly. Teachers would do well to compile a complete list of adverbial conjunctions before the lesson so as to be equipped to make ordered lists after the students have offered their suggestions. Randolph Quirk and Sidney Greenbaum, in their University Grammar of English, provide all the material required.

Sheet V.

Noun markers (This, he, our, one .....)

Verb markers (is , must has .....)

Phrase Phrase markers (in, before,.....)

Clause markers (When, although, whereas.....)

The second part of this sheet is an attempt to bring together all that the student has learned so far. The student is given a paragraph in which there are a number of complex sentences and constructions. He is asked to carry out the following exercise,

1. Isolate the main verb.

2. Isolate thesubject.

3. Separate the sentence into units by isolating the main clause and the subordinate clauses.

4. Give the referent for any noun substitutes which may be used.

5. Translate the main clause into the native language by finding the meaning first of the verb, then the nouns, then the prepositions and then adding adjectives and adverbs.

6. Translate subordinate clauses in the same way then add them to themain clause.

Where necessary, the teacher can deal with problems of ellipsis and deletion.

A course such as the one we outline above is intended to take about ten hours. It is time well spent. If the student responds well, he will be equipped to tackle the kind of reading materials which are required both by his English course and by the demand of his own field of specialization.